School of K-pop: Teaching a Nation Through Idol Survival Programs

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Music.

Chapel Hill
2018

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ABSTRACT

Grace Kweon: School of K-pop: Teaching a Nation Through Idol Survival Programs
(Under the direction of David Garcia)

Entering its third decade, *hallyu*—or the sudden global spread of Korean culture—has drawn renewed attention to Korean identity. K-pop idols continue to act as the main agents of *hallyu*. Since 2016, many of these idols began to debut through reality TV competition shows. Often referred to as "idol survival programs," these shows are noteworthy for their large size, sudden popularity, and audience involvement. I use one such show, *Produce 101*, to argue that K-pop reality TV is a transnational space in which participants learn to configure their sense of place in the globalized modern world.

Notes on Romanization and Translation

All Korean words have been romanized according to the Revised Romanization system. Exceptions are those Korean authors who have published in English using the preferred spelling of their own. All translations from Korean to English are mine, unless otherwise noted.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In Paris of 2016, eleven girls in school uniforms performed at KCON, the largest K-pop festival in the world. These girls were members of the popular girl group I.O.I. In attendance were the then South Korean president Park Geun-Hye and some French diplomats, watching alongside twelve thousand screaming K-pop fans. Weaving through the popular music and political spheres, these idols of the industry have become the face of Korean culture as K-pop expands into international communities. This is a part of *hallyu*, also known as the Korean Wave, which refers to the sudden global popularity boom of Korean cultural products. The ongoing phenomenon of *hallyu* began in the late 1990s with the success of Korean TV dramas in Asian countries. A decade later, K-pop overtook the TV programs as *hallyu*'s main driving force. Music entertainment agencies have recognized that K-pop stars have incredible potential as cultural ambassadors. They recruit en mass young aspiring stars, or "trainees." Once contractually bound to these agencies, the trainees undergo rigorous physical, social, and moral training for years until their debut as idols. Upon achieving some success, the idols are immediately put to work, promoting not only their own music but also Korean movies, fashion, food, video games, and beauty products overseas.

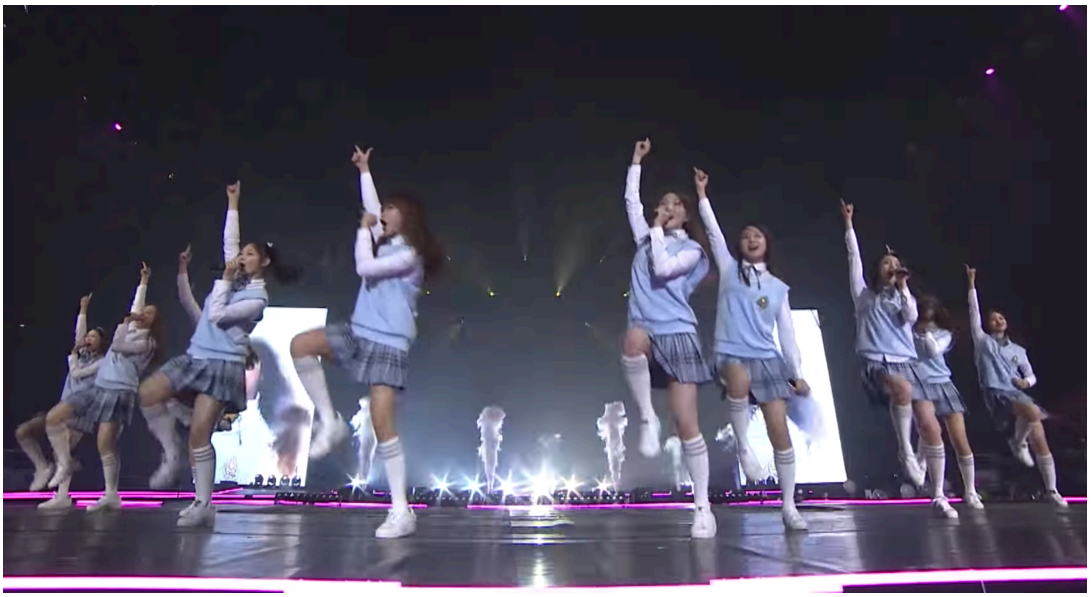

Figure 1: I.O.I performs "Pick Me" at KCON France 2016[1]

Since the start of *hallyu*, successive Korean governments have also played their part in idol manipulation.[2] They eagerly allocate resources and create policies to support the idols' activities abroad to promote the national culture industry. The nation-state frames the idols' international fame as a national success in the global soft power competition.[3] For decades, the people within Korea have kept an eye on such developments with interest, but increasingly, everyday K-pop consumers and bystanders are looking to take part in these nationalist projects. They found one such opportunity for K-pop participation in the TV shows featuring trainees—specifically, reality competition shows labeled as "idol survival programs" (아이돌 서바이벌

[1] Image captured from video by Mnet K-POP, "[KCON 2016 France×M COUNTDOWN] I.O.I_Pick Me M COUNTDOWN 160614 EP.478," YouTube, 14 June 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8pdS-fqiA8.

[2] For an overarching summary of policies through the decades, see Yong-Jin Won, "*Hallyu*: Numerous Discourses, One Perspective," in *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, ed. Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal-Yong Jin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 37-38.

[3] Jocelyn Yi-Hsuan Lai, "East Asian Stars, Public Space, and Star Studies," in *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, ed. Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai, and Chris Berry (New York: Routledge, 2017), 174.

프로그램). The label itself is helpful in understanding the format of the show. “Idol” indicates the ultimate goal, which is to turn the competing trainees into full-fledged idols by the end of the season. “Survival” refers to the fact that viewers get to evaluate and eliminate contestants regularly through votes. The trainees that “survive” through the end win the competition, at which point they debut together as a new K-pop group. And finally, “program” is the operative word in the label, at least for the purposes of this thesis. Program can refer to the nature of television broadcasts, but it can also refer to an educational program—a set system that prepares the trainees to enter the industry officially. Successful groups like I.O.I debuted by winning these training competitions. As I will explain, these shows emphasize crucial moments of learning rather than moments of musical performance.

***Produce 101*: A National Guide to K-pop Production**

Televised singing competitions are not new to Korean television. Korean programs such as *Superstar K* (2009-16), *K-pop Star* (2011-17), and *The Voice of Korea* (2012-14) presented and eliminated contestants based on celebrity judges’ and audience’s votes, in a similar manner to that of popular music competition franchises such as the *Idol* series and *The X Factor*. However, these imported formats gave way to the rise of a new type of reality competition shows, adapted for the particularities of the K-pop industry. Large-scale shifts in Korean music reality shows first drew my attention in 2016 with the success of *Produce 101*, a show that set the standard for subsequent idol survival programs. As the title suggests, *Produce 101* claims to be a beginner-friendly how-to guide for producing K-pop groups. The new format of the competition is explained in the opening monologue, delivered by the host and *hallyu* celebrity, Jang Geun-Suk:

> These girls have been preparing anywhere from a couple of months to over ten years, not on a stage, but in small practice rooms . . . We are going to make a national girl group ourselves . . . *Produce 101* does not have any judges . . . One hundred percent of the decisions rely on you! Only eleven of these girls are going to represent the girl group of Asia. Are you just going to watch? Vote for your girl now![4]

With the monologue concluded, the host Jang moves aside. Behind him, one hundred and one female trainees bow deeply from the waist and shout in unison: "Dear producer, please take care of us well!" (Figure 2). Through the opening spectacle, these young girls have placed themselves at the mercy of the viewers.

Figure 2. Trainees of *Produce 101* bow to the viewers[5]

The premise, as the host explained, is that the *national* viewers become K-pop group producers, and by extension the nation becomes the agency. For the following four months, these young girls live together and complete challenges. The situation resembles the rigorous training

[4] "Episode 1," *Produce 101*, directed by Joon-Young An, translated by me (January 22, 2016; Seoul: Mnet), Television.

[5] All images from *Produce 101* are captured from an unofficial streaming site, Kshow123.net. The translations for the episodes have been provided by the international fan group, T101 Subs. For all the episodes, see "Produce 101," Kshow123, http://kshow123.net/show/produce-101/.

provided within K-pop entertainment agencies. The show provides "coaches" of varying specialties to comment on the trainees' progress. The coaches are either famous K-pop stars or K-pop trainers who have helped to create famous groups. Because they have already surpassed the K-pop training system, they can frame their commentary as authoritative instruction from seniors of the industry. But as promised, the final decision each week is up to the voters, who can choose either to vote for the trainees praised by the coaches, or to disregard the coaches' opinions. Through this structure, *Produce 101* invites viewers to reimagine their participation as running a national K-pop agency. The showrunners recruit trainees, and the K-pop professionals coach them. Then, the head of the agency—the viewers—determine which of them are ready for debut. Commentary in *Produce 101* is intentionally steeped in nationalist rhetoric. The viewers are pressured to take their role as producers seriously, to remember that their choices are of national consequence. Despite the heavy-handed appeal to nationalist sentiments, *Produce 101* more or less conveys the stakes of K-pop production in the real world.

Most of the time, *Produce 101* viewers see the trainees in small rehearsal spaces rather than on a performance stage. The contestants are filmed living together in a dormitory-like setting and preparing for the weekly evaluations. Like the CEO of a K-pop agency, the viewers drop in once a week on the practicing trainees to monitor their progress. (This is similar in format to the *Star Academy* franchise, which also films contestants in a school-like setting.) Because there are one hundred and one contestants, regular individual evaluations are unfeasible within the one-hour episodes. Instead, the coaches divide the contestants into groups and evaluate each group as a unit. As the girls of *Produce 101* struggle to work together, their coaches reiterate—to them and to the viewers—that coordination and collaboration are the pillars of the industry. Verbal evaluations and commentary require much screentime, to the extent that

at times, the coaches function as the real stars of the show. Due to time constraints, the viewers have few opportunities to learn about the background story of each contestant. Instead, they see more of the contestants' interactions with their teachers and with each other. With individual stories and performances minimized, the contestants must rely on group rehearsals to appeal to their voters. Therefore, the gateway to global stardom is governed by efforts to control this rehearsal space: the trainees use their own rehearsal behaviors; the industry executives use onscreen commentary; and the viewers use votes.

Produce 101's success in 2016 led to a new wave of idol survival programs. Though the shows varied in style, the core tenets of *Produce 101* remained—national participation and youth education. In figure 3, I have compiled a list of notable idol survival programs and their characteristics to illustrate a distinct shift in 2016. First, the number of contestants jumped from a little over ten to now hundreds of contestants per season. The increased size meant that unlike before *Produce 101*, entertainment agencies all across the industry were sending trainees to participate in the shows. I also pointed out the gradual introduction of an official host figure. Previous reality programs involving trainees were small in scope and limited to a single agency, so usually the CEO of that agency would MC the show. With growing numbers of participating agencies, however, the idol survival programs needed a neutral third party to moderate the proceedings. And with growing numbers of viewers, the host began to fill the role of a professional entertainer to keep audiences interested and invested. I interpret these changes as evidence of a coordinated, industry-wide effort to involve a wider Korean public.

Curiously, the shows that implemented these changes were also the first to recruit female trainees instead of their male counterparts. This suggests that the show creators envisioned young girls in particular as central to the shows' narrative powers and national appeal. My thesis will

argue that the K-pop industry creates a musical spectacle of young girl bodies to rouse a sense of collective national identity. *Produce 101* and subsequent idol survival programs portray the K-pop industry as a great educator of Korean youth, especially of young girls. These shows are an educational program: they teach their contestants to become global stars, but they also teach their viewers to become K-pop producers and embrace the industry. My research on K-pop idol survival programs examines understandings of education and girlhood within the Korean context.

Idol Survival Program	Contestants	Winners	Debut Group Name	Host
MyDOL (2012)	10 boys	6 boys	VIXX	No host (CEO Hwang Se-Jun)
WIN: Who Is Next (2013)	11 boys	5 boys	WINNER	No host (CEO Yang Hyun-Suk)
No.Mercy (2014)	12 boys	7 boys	Monsta X	No host (a panel of artists)
Mix & Match (2014)	9 boys	7 boys	iKON	No host (CEO Yang Hyun-Suk)
Sixteen (2015)	16 girls	9 girls	TWICE	No host (CEO Park Jin-Young)
Finding Momoland (2016)	10 girls	7 girls	Momoland	Kim Il-Joong
Produce 101 (2016)	101 girls	11 girls	I.O.I	Jang Geun-Suk
Boys24 (2016)	49 boys	8 boys	IN2IT	Oh Yeon-Seo
Produce 101 Season 2 (2017)	101 boys	11 boys	Wanna One	BoA
Idol School (2017)	42 girls	9 girls	fromis_9	Kim Hee-Chul
The Unit (2017)	126 girls and boys	9 girls, 9 boys	UNI.T (girls) and (UNB (boys)	Rain
Mix Nine (2017)	400 girls and boys	9 boys	Not yet debuted	Noh Hong-Chul
Produce 48 (2018)	96 girls	Not yet determined	Not yet debuted	Lee Seung-Gi

Figure 3. Idol survival program trends

Methodology

Reality TV, to borrow the words of Marwan Kraidy, is a "laboratory where various versions of modernity are elaborated and contested, a courtroom of sorts that hosts modernity's endless trial."[6] I understand the idol survival program as a localized reality TV format that elaborates and contests versions of a Korean modernity, within the boundaries of K-pop. Three groups participate in this endeavor: the trainees, the showrunners, and the viewers. Given the complex power relations between these groups, they adopt differing strategies to manage their own representation on TV. Accordingly, I examine the show using three separate approaches.

My primary research material is the televised footage of *Produce 101*. For each case study in this project, I begin with a close reading of key scenes. In my critical listening and viewing, I attend to performance decisions—from vocal style and choreography to attire and facial expressions—enacted by trainees both on stage and in rehearsal rooms. Without readily available commentary from the contestants themselves, I make sense of the trainees' musical performance through my own analysis. My interpretation is informed by existing scholarship on *hallyu* and other musical reality TV programs.

I pivot from the trainees to the showrunners, a designation that includes both the coaches and the production team working on *Produce 101*. My main interest here is how meaning is packaged into the episodes, a process termed "encoding" by Stuart Hall.[7] I evaluate the coaches' televised commentary about the trainees' rehearsal and stage performances. Furthermore, I look and listen to the footage editing as additional commentary from the production side. On the

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[6] Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18.

[7] Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (paper, Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973).

whole, the *Produce 101* coaches and production staff are senior members active in the K-pop industry; therefore, I consider the showrunners' interventions to be a reflection of the broader industry's interests. Building on my findings, I construct an overarching narrative staged throughout the idol survival program.

To gauge the audience response, I turn to critical discourse in Korean online periodicals and Internet literature associated with the show, including interviews and episode reviews. The audience of *Produce 101* includes those who vote online regularly and those who simply watched the episodes. I presume that the viewing public is largely Korean or at least Korean language speakers, given that the show did not provide official subtitles in other languages at the time of its airing. I am also mindful of the vote distribution in each elimination round, as the tallied votes are meant to represent a public consensus. Here, I am interested in broad trends in audience opinion each week, as well as specific commentary responding to the trainees and showrunners.

In working through these three approaches, I engage in the topic as a long time K-pop consumer and as a native member of the Korean diaspora. This study began as an exercise in understanding my own positionality as a Korean immigrant in an American musicological institution. I identify as part of the Korean audience that participated in these idol survival programs to create the K-pop groups; simultaneously, I identify as part of the K-pop consumers abroad for whom the K-pop products are tailored.

Although I have laid out three discrete subjects and approaches to my research project, they are deeply entangled in application. For example, the showrunners display press headlines from the previous week on the next episode, and the coaches alter their pedagogical strategies according to public opinion. Trainees perform differently after viewing the voting results and

hearing the coaches' comments. Contestants, viewers, and producers alternatingly clash in a power struggle and collaborate in perfect synchrony. My thesis is a close reading of these musical entanglements as an ongoing conversation—about Korean modernity and identity.

Literature Review

In my consideration of modern Korean identity and popular culture, I lean on recent *hallyu* scholarship from media and communication studies. *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality* (2017) is the latest and most comprehensive volume of essays, edited by Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal-Yong Jin. The collection not only provides a historical account of *hallyu*'s past two decades, but also suggests several theoretical frameworks for understanding *hallyu*'s cultural products. Yong-Jin Won's contribution to the volume, an essay titled "*Hallyu*: Numerous Discourses, One Perspective," was particularly useful to my inquiries. The author outlines policies of each Korean administration since the mid–1990s, arguing that the government and entertainment agencies worked symbiotically to promote cultural nationalism. Won found that local coverage of *hallyu* pushed one of four narratives, all of which were nationalistic:

> [F]irst, Korea had finally been recognized by the world; second, Korea had occupied the forefront of the world's attention; third, the economic success of K-pop in foreign countries was derived from the excellence of Korean culture and sensibility; and fourth, increased effort should be made to develop this phenomenon further.[8]

He argues that because Korean governments have broadcasted *hallyu* success stories for decades, "[penetrating] everyday lives of Koreans, it has become almost impossible to ask difficult

[8] Yong-Jin Won, "*Hallyu*: Numerous Discourses, One Perspective," in *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, ed. Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal-Yong Jin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 29.

questions or raise criticisms regarding *hallyu*."[9] My thesis is in part a response to Won's call-to-action, questioning the idol manufacturing processes that fuel *hallyu*.

While the vast body of *hallyu* scholarship and my personal diasporic experiences inform my research, my analysis has clear limitations. Because I approach the televised footage as my primary text, my project is decidedly not an ethnographic study. My interpretations are not based on personal communication with participants in the K-pop sphere. Michael Fuhr's excellent monograph on K-pop, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop* (2016) serves as an effective counterbalance, as his work draws on his lengthy interviews with heads of K-pop agencies, composers, and trainees located in Korea.

This thesis participates in the contemporary efforts to theorize reality TV and national identity more broadly. Marwan Kraidy considers several reality TV shows in the Middle East in his wide-ranging book, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (2010). He argues that the reality TV shows' success in the Arab world triggered a "period of collective soul searching during which Arabs have debated norms governing their public life and grappled with shifting identities and changing values."[10] His case studies tackle elements of Westernness or foreignness that linger as reality TV formats are imported from the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Korean citizens find themselves in the midst of the Korean Wave, in which the small peninsular nation commands worldwide attention and soft power through its cultural exports. This has created a rise in "cosmopolitan strivings," efforts from Koreans to participate in a

[9] Ibid., 37-38.

[10] Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

globalized world to elevate their social status and sense of self-worth.[11] Korean citizens, governing bodies, media, and institutions all keep a watchful eye on the K-pop industry, with the understanding that the status of K-pop is a reflection of their own status in the world. In the context of idol survival programs, such cosmopolitan strivings mean that the viewers use voting as a strategy to control how their nation represented on the international stage. Andrea Bohlman and Alexander Rehding identified a similar voting strategy being used in countries that participate in the Eurovision Song Contest each year, a strategy they call the "European two-step."[12] They posit that the voters from each European country elect an artist that will likely appeal to both the domestic and the wider European audiences. Viewers of *Produce 101* and other idol survival programs are participating in a *Korean* two-step, choosing participants that simultaneously embody the Korean ideals of identities and resonate with an international fandom.

Throughout this thesis I rely heavily on research of Western TV shows because the Korean music reality shows themselves were modeled after their Western counterparts. For example, in the book, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol*, Katherine Meizel reasons that commercial music and the music industry are not simply forces to be criticized or resisted, but are themselves critical sites for redefining American culture. Following her lead, I also look to the televised K-pop products as a productive site of cultural analysis. These TV shows simultaneously reveal and redefine national understandings of identity. Meizel posits that reality TV competitions like *American Idol* shrink the gap between consumers and the industry producers, which causes debates about national identity and culture to rise anew:

[11] Ho, "Fuel for South Korea's 'Global Dreams Factory': The Desires of Parents Whose Children Dream of Becoming K-pop Stars," *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 478.

[12] Andrea Bohlman and Alexander Rehding, "Doing the European Two-Step," 2013: 239.

> The barriers have slipped that formerly held apart production and consumption, performer and audience, public and private, reified musical genres, even politics and entertainment . . . But it also contributes to the equation of identity with brand, and to the imagination of the U.S. itself at a historical moment when Americans are struggling with identity on multiple levels—being *American* in an ever more identity-conscious nation, and being *America* in a global context with its own blurring borders, that increasingly relies upon transnational economic, political, social, and cultural structures.[13]

Discussion of identity becomes a discussion of national brand, given the show's designation as an *American* endeavor. Similarly, the Korean idol survival programs close gaps between the production and consumption sides and demand that they both grapple with the Brand Korea. In her own analysis of the American brand, Meizel maintains that the American identities and values depicted within *American Idol* help to imagine the nation first and foremost as a diverse one. She concludes that American diversity is carefully highlighted and coached into a viable commodity by judges, with contestants packaged into familiar portraits of American identities. What, then, are the portraits of *Korean* identities, as packaged by the new idol survival programs? My reading is that the episodes of *Produce 101* are structured to praise group coordination and collaboration, rather than to emphasize diversity or individuality. These qualities are instilled within the trainees as ideal Korean traits they need in order to properly represent the nation. To gauge the national consensus of ideal Korean traits, I look at which behaviors are commended or criticized by online voters and the coaches.

William Cheng writes about the relationship between reality TV competitions and national ideals in the North American context. In the article, "Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions," he exposes the ways in which disabled auditionees are exploited to appeal to the ideals of the American Dream—to tell a narrative of overcoming.

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[13] Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 2. Emphasis in the original text.

> On a show such as *American Idol* . . . the American Dream is the star, promising every contestant a shot at fame . . . . [S]ing proficiently enough, on your own merits, and maybe the world will listen.[14]

But it is difficult to tell a story of overcoming personal adversity in a show such as *Produce 101*, in the absence of individual performances and screen time. So what overarching narrative is a K-pop idol survival program meant to tell? The idol survival programs promise contestants fame, not based on their preexisting merits, but on their ability to *become* proficient as determined by the industry standards. The shows are meant to *do* work onto its contestants; therefore, they tell a narrative of learning and adapting.

Cheng points to the slippage between voice and body to explain why music shows have such narrative capabilities:

> Whereas matters of disability are liable to leave audiences at a loss for words . . . , people may feel relatively at ease using safe, standard vocabularies to pass technical judgment on voice alone, on music as music.[15]

Musical voice serves as a vehicle for viewers to speak about the contestants' bodies, and this holds true for idol survival programs. Following Cheng's approach, I examine the way the bodies of youth, especially bodies of young girls, are publicly policed under the guise of musical education and evaluation. I take care to center music in this process of mass policing because I consider it my main contribution to *hallyu* scholarship. The music is an essential component of the K-pop industry's inner workings and of shifting identity formations in Korea. Research on *hallyu*-era nationalism tends to "register the occurrence of change, [but] they do not specify the mechanisms of change."[16] Building on works that register such occurrences of changing Korean

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[14] William Cheng, "Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 2 (2017): 190.

[15] Ibid.

[16] See Emma Campbell, "The End of Ethnic Nationalism? Changing Conceptions of National Identity and Belonging Among Young South Koreans," *Nations and Nationalism* 21, no. 3 (2015): 485-86, and Jan Kubik,

identities in *hallyu*, my thesis aims to reveal the mechanism of this change, a mechanism in which Koreanness is taught and negotiated through musical participation.

As I work through these larger questions, I also want to examine the role of musicality—especially vocalization—in discourses about national identity and personhood. In thinking about the concept of the human voice in contemporary Korean contexts, I draw on the work of anthropologist Nicholas Harkness, author of *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (2016). According to Harkness, Korean Christians aim to exhibit certain idealized qualities of modern Christian personhood by cultivating a "clean" voice, a voice that emulates European-style classical singing. The act of voicing in Seoul functions as an act of narrating, proclaiming one's status as a citizen of a progressive society: "The voice becomes an emblem of progress . . . , a communicative medium spanning bodily manipulation and sonic entailment to exhibit the idealized qualities of larger-scale social change in Korea."[17] Building on Harkness's research, I look to the commentary about the contestants' voices on the idol survival programs to see how the K-pop industry, too, is being positioned as an emblem of progress, cultivating "clean" voices and personhoods.

Thesis Outline

The first chapter traces the efforts to portray the trainees as students. They are placed within televised competition settings that masquerade as a classroom environment. I illustrate the symbolic importance of the classroom in Korean culture and history. Schools have been a central site of national modernization and youth oppression, and now the K-pop industry is modeling its

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"Ethnography of Politics: Foundations, Applications, Prospects," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 33.

[17] Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 22.

operations after them. On the one hand, it is clear that idol survival programs provide a rare and valuable insight into the innerworkings inside the K-pop factory. Everyday Koreans can shape the idols' global careers with their own hands and therefore take part in the nation's advancement through *hallyu* enterprises. On the other hand, this rebranding of the industry obscures rather than confronts the plight of Korean youths in the project of cultural nationalism. My second chapter deconstructs the treatment of girls within the shows and within the industry at large. The notion that girls thrive through the K-pop system appears false, as I show that the girls are more tightly controlled than before. Moreover, the survival programs now recruit national viewers to monitor the girls' bodies, behaviors, and musical activities. National support for the programs teaches Koreans to collaborate and control the girls in order to control the nation's image. In the conclusion, I look at the aftermath of *Produce 101*, both inside and outside of Korea, to get a sense of how K-pop industry has rebranded the national identity.

CHAPTER TWO

Unpacking the K-pop Classroom

Recent idol survival programs index the classroom as a concept in many ways. Many shows require the contestants to wear school uniforms for the duration of the program. As seen in figure 4, the set of the shows places the trainees inside rooms that visually resemble a classroom or a school auditorium. Like most Korean secondary schools, the idol survival programs are generally not co-educational, meaning that boys and girls do not train together on camera. When coaches evaluate the trainees, the results are organized within a grading system and announced, much like the student academic rankings posted publicly in Korean classrooms. These grades have immediate effects on the contestants. For example, in the show *SIXTEEN*, the girls who scored poorly were put in dirtier dormitories and had limited access to rehearsal rooms. The bulk of the content is about the trainees' learning experiences under the tutelage of K-pop coaches. Some shows, such as *Idol School*, explicitly label the participants as students, the host as the principal, and the coaches as teachers.

What are the reasons and ramifications for claiming the classroom environment? I will first attempt to unpack the meaning of a classroom space and its value as a symbol of Korean modernity. I highlight the onscreen progress of *Produce 101* contestant Kim So-Hye, which I argue is a part of the show's efforts to align with educational institutions. Her narrative arc positions the show and its creators as educators of the nation. Then, I discuss the show's logo song "Pick Me" to illustrate that the Korean classroom is also a site of youth oppression, raising

issues with the supposedly wholesome image of the educational system. I argue that the K-pop industry's rebranding is an intentional but problematic strategic move to win over national support.

Figure 4. Classroom environment in idol survival programs
(top: *Idol School*[18]; bottom: *Produce 101 Season 2*[19])

[18] Screen captured from "Idol School 아이돌학교 입학생 최초공개 '예쁘니까' 7/13 (목) 밤 9:30 첫방송 170701 EP.0." *Mnet Official* video, 2:41. June 29, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aFOJpYmPfE.

The School Scene as a Symbol of Korean Modernity

In 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama spoke at an Oklahoman high school about the Korean school system: "Obviously, as President you travel around a lot, and you go to countries like South Korea where…they pay their teachers the way they pay their doctors, and they consider education to be at the highest rung of the professions."[20] In another speech, he again emphasized the Korean educational policies as being more progressive than the American counterparts. "We can no longer afford an academic calendar designed for when America was a nation of farmers who needed their children at home plowing the land at the end of each day. That calendar may have once made sense, but today it puts us at a competitive disadvantage. Our children—listen to this—our children spend over a month less in school than children in South Korea—every year. That's no way to prepare them for a 21st century economy."[21] Such attention from a global world leader received much press and elicited many reactions within Korea. "Why is Obama so Envious of South Korean Education?" asked one newspaper columnist;[22] another wrote about "Obama's one-sided love for Korean educational system."[23] The comparison to American farmers portrayed Koreans as modernized citizens and validated the country as a developed nation worthy of envy.

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[19] Photo from article by Harmony4377, "'Produce 101' Season 2 Surpasses Season One's Ratings," *Allkpop*, June 17, 2017, https://www.allkpop.com/article/2017/06/produce-101-season-2-surpasses-season-ones-ratings.

[20] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Launch of ConnectHome Initiative," The White House, July 15, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/15/remarks-president-launch-connecthome-initiative.

[21] Barack Obama, "Remarks of the President to the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce," The White House, March 10, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-united-states-hispanic-chamber-commerce.

[22] Bum Lee, "Why is Obama Envious of Korean Education?" *Hankyoreh*, June 1, 2009, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/358108.html (in Korean).

[23] Yong-Yoo Yang, "Obama's One-Sided Love for the Korean Educational System," *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 14, 2016, http://news.joins.com/article/19717249 (in Korean).

There are no signs of diminishing status so far. Global rankings still list South Korea as the world leader in education, literacy, high school and college graduation rates, and various standardized tests.[24] The country's educational system is a source of national pride and functions as a symbol of Korea's modernity on the global stage. But the educational enterprise takes top priority on the local level as well. On the day of the national college entrance exam, the workday and stock markets open later to avoid traffic jams that might hinder students' travel to testing centers. The planes are also grounded so their noise does not disturb the students during the exam. There are many teachers who achieve celebrity status for maintaining high success rates when it comes to getting their students into prestigious schools. Like the factories and their mega-conglomerates, the country's educational institutions are also given credit for the rapid postcolonial advancement since the 1950s.

Having achieved global recognition as a modern nation, Koreans strive to maintain their status with a sense of urgency. This is because of the enduring belief that their colonial experience occurred primarily because Japan modernized first, allowing it to occupy Korea under the pretext of helping a country that has fallen behind.[25] Education is seen as the key to this modern status. It is widely acknowledged that the transition from pre-modern to a modern Korea was powered by high educational zeal. But the focus on education is rooted in traditional Confucian values, as educational theorist Duck-Joo Kwak explains:

[N]eo-Confucianism, has occupied a unique place in the formation of Korean modernity,

[24] In one such evaluation, at least six ranking systems were consulted, including rankings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the United Nation's Economic and Social Council (UNESOC), The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS). For compiled scores, see Human Rights Advocate, "South Korea's Education System Outperforms 208 Nations," World Top 20 Project, January 16, 2017, https://worldtop20.org/south-koreas-education-system-outperforms-208-nations.

[25] Jini Kim Watson,"Imperial Mimicry, Modernisation Theory and the Contradictions of Postcolonial South Korea," *Postcolonial Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 186.

> as a source of *moral* psyche deep in the minds of Korean people against both Japanese colonialism and western individualism.[26]

Korean modernity, then, hinges on a neo-Confucian combination of anti-individualism and educational zeal. And as Kwak stated, the push for modernity—and therefore for education—comes from moral *belief*. There is a fervent belief in that the only way to survive is through a good education system, to the extent that many Korean parents willingly drive themselves into debt while paying for their children's private education.

The K-pop industry has capitalized on these anxious beliefs by offering its services as an educational program. Recent ethnographic studies have found that a growing number of families send children into K-pop agencies "to give legitimation to their own personal desires to reposition themselves favorably in an increasingly competitive and globalized capitalistic economy so that they would not be left behind."[27] With the national attention focused on this educational modern identity, the idol survival programs' gravitation towards a school-like image produces obvious advantages. In a stage set that appears to be a classroom, the young trainees represent the nation's youth onscreen, while the industry plays the celebrated role of educator. This teacher-student relationship is established in a number of ways throughout the recent idol survival programs, programs that are enthusiastically supported by K-pop entertainment agencies looking to rebrand. I will highlight one such narrative, about the transformative powers of the K-pop educational system as seen in *Produce 101*.

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[26] Duck-Joo Kwak, "Encounter of East Asian Educational Tradition with Western Modernity: The Korean Case," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (January, 2018): 2. Emphasis in the original text.

[27] Swee-Lin Ho, "Fuel for South Korea's 'Global Dreams Factory': The Desires of Parents Whose Children Dream of Becoming K-pop Stars," *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 500.

“F”-Level Trainee Kim So-Hye

In the first episode of *Produce 101*, the viewers are introduced to a 16-year-old contestant named Kim So-Hye. She drew attention early on in the season because she had accidentally applied to the competition thinking it to be an acting audition. So-Hye was trained as an actress, and consequently had no training in musical performance. When time came for the first round of evaluations, she quickly received the lowest letter grade of “F” for her dancing and singing abilities. During practice sessions, she wore a large “F” on her shirt, grouped together with other trainees that had scored poorly. (Figure 5) She became the frequent target of criticisms from the coaches, especially from the dance coach Bae Yoon-Jung, known for her sharp tongue.

Figure 5. Episode 2: Kim So-Hye (bottom right) singled out for criticism during rehearsals

The narrative arc of So-Hye began to take shape one week, when Coach Bae halted the music and refused to coach So-Hye’s team any more because of So-Hye’s constant mistakes. The coach questioned her place in the industry, remarking, “Do you really want to become a singer? Then try harder.” Through a voice-over narration, So-Hye explained that all she wanted was to not let

down her teacher and teammates. The challenge for the week was to perform a rendition of a 2008 song “So Hot” by the K-pop group Wonder Girls. The trainees were expected to have a level of familiarity with the song because it was a staple in the K-pop repertoire. But naturally, So-Hye who received no prior music lessons had to master the performance routine from scratch. When the experienced contestant Kim Se-Jeong saw that So-Hye was struggling, she approached and offered to coach her. Se-Jeong had been ranked as an “A”-level contestant for her lyrical singing and charming onstage presence. Moreover, Se-Jeong had garnered more audience votes than the hundred other contestants on the show. The episode featured a montage of clips showing the viewers that the two girls rehearsed overnight in front of the mirror. (Figure 6)

Figure 6. Episode 4: Kim So-Hye (left) and Kim Se-Jeong (right) rehearse together

A few days later, Coach Bae returned to evaluate the group in the rehearsal room. The cameras focused on Kim So-Hye, who completed the routine with no visible mistakes. To the surprise of the contestants, the usually relentless Coach Bae began to cry; she announced that she was moved to tears at the progress that So-Hye had accomplished. (Figure 7) Se-Jeong chimed in

to remark that So-Hye stayed up all night to practice. The two girls and their teammates embraced while the coach applauded their teamwork.

Figure 7. Episode 4: Coach Bae Yoon-Jung sheds tears after Kim So-Hye's routine

After Kim So-Hye, the worst performing student, won the approval of her teacher, the viewers of *Produce 101* responded with their own approval. The voting tally after episode 4 shifted dramatically in favor of Kim So-Hye. She was rescued from certain obscurity among the hundred and one girls to become one of the most popular contestants. Even the media outlets reported on Kim Se-Jeong's private practice sessions with Kim So-Hye, chronicling the tale of the "A"-level trainee helping an "F"-level participant to succeed together.[28] Both girls maintained their popularity with voters from that point on and eventually debuted as the girl group I.O.I. During the final episode, when So-Hye found out that she was one of the eleven winners, she gave a speech thanking the creators of the program, her teachers, and the national

[28] In fact, at the time of airing, episode 4 of *Produce 101* was the most viewed episode of the show according to the Nielsen ratings. The press cited Kim Se-Jeong's chemistry with Kim So-Hye as the reason for such high viewership. For an example of such coverage, see "Produce 101's Kim Se-Jeong and Kim So-Hye 'Private Teaching' Scene Hits Number 1 Viewership Rating," *Chosun Ilbo*, February 13, 2016, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/02/13/2016021300939.html (in Korean).

producers. As grateful tears streamed down So-Hye's face, the host Jang Geun-Suk likened her story to a "coming-of-age drama."

Indeed, the trainees—as well as the hosts, coaches, and viewers—are meant to enact a drama onstage, a coming-of-age story within the industry. The adolescent trainees are raised to musical maturity in front of the audience. I describe the story of So-Hye to convey just how much of the idol survival programs are dedicated to moments of learning and teacher-student relationships. Such emphasis causes the rehearsal spaces of the show to turn into classrooms in which students and their teacher thrive together. Coaches like Bae Yoon-Jung are included to represent K-pop executives in general, executives who approach the young trainees as harsh yet emotionally invested and effective teachers. As such, the perceived teaching role of the industry makers likens the entertainment agencies with the nation's other educational institutions. Once again, the K-pop industry can be seen as the face of Korean modernity, aligned with the much-acclaimed Korean educational system. Additionally, this new image of the industry justifies its control over the young trainees within the show and within the agencies, because like the classroom spaces, the K-pop practice rooms can be seen as sites in which Korean youths are turned into well-educated and globally admired students.

The School Scene as a Site of Youth Oppression

But as the industry emulates the benefits school systems, it also reifies their problems. Korean schools may be objects of national pride and global envy, but they produce their impressive statistics at a cost. Some argue that Korea's educational zeal is actually an educational fever; they argue that the nation is ailing from intense pressure and buckling under the burden of excessive private education expenditures. Education is considered to be *the*

determining factor of a successful future, ranging from job prospects to a healthy marriage, creating an academic attainment-oriented society.[29]

The feverish state is apparent in the lives of Korean students. A typical student in Korea begins the weekday by attending a full day of instruction at a public school, followed by hours of extracurricular activities and supplemental studies at a private educational agency called *hagwon* (sometimes known as "cram schools"). Though they vary in scope, the general purpose of hagwons is to prepare their students for entry into a top-ranked high school or university. Hagwons specialize in subjects such as mathematics, foreign languages, sciences, as well as sports, arts, and music. They often operate until midnight, contributing to a nationwide epidemic of sleep deprivation and stress. Additionally, the hagwon attendees are getting younger every year. One study published in 2017 shows that more than 83 percent of 5-year-olds and 36 percent of 2-year-olds in Korea receive private education at hagwons.[30]

Structurally, the hagwons' long hours and frequent evaluations are similar to that of K-pop agencies. The adolescent trainees commit themselves to the agency during their afterschool hours, with the promise that one day, the trainees will be ready to debut. One trainee spoke in an interview about her daily schedule while trying to juggle school and training at S.M. Entertainment, the country's largest K-pop agency:

> I had to go to middle school, and when school finished, I went to the training center right away, still wearing the school uniform. It took 1.5 hours to the training center in Apgujeong where I practiced from 5:00 p.m. until 10:30 p.m. Then I got back home around midnight. That was during the week. At the weekend or during vacation when I didn't have to go to school, I left home around 9:30 a.m., and practiced from 11 a.m. to

[29] Jeong-Kyu Lee, "Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education," *Revista Elctrónica de Investigación Educativa* 8, No. 1 (2006), https://redie.uabc.mx/redie/article/view/118/1065.

[30] Se-Hwan Bak, "83 Percent of Five-Year-Olds in Korea go to Hagwon," *The Korean Herald*, January 9, 2017, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170109000747.

10:30 p.m., almost 12 hours.[31]

Given such pressures on students and trainees alike, perhaps it is little surprise that Korean students are notoriously unhappy. On top of the demanding schedule and high pressure, there is a culture of rampant violence within school settings. Bullying and gang activities have plagued middle and high schools. Furthermore, teachers' use of corporal punishment was banned in Seoul only in 2010, and the criminalization continues to be a source of debate because Korean teachers and parents support the idea that students learn better when struck or physically punished. And most devastatingly, South Korea has the highest suicide rate in the world for adolescents between ages 10 to 19.[32] Consequently, I wish to draw attention to the potential dangers in K-pop industry's alignment with the national educational system, both of which have been accused with abusive management of young Koreans. In particular, I point to the multiple appearances of the song "Pick Me" in order to raise issues with the K-pop "educational" process.

Learning and Teaching "Pick Me"

Produce 101, like other idol survival programs, introduced its contestants and viewers to its "logo song," a musical number that represents the show. The logo song was titled "Pick Me," composed by the veteran K-pop composer Kim Chang-Hwan (also known as Midas-T). In the second episode, Jang Geun-Suk gathered the girls and showed them a video in which several performers in masks performed the newly composed "Pick Me." Figure 8 shows a scene from the training video. Five unidentified dancers demonstrated the choreography while an unidentified

[31] Interview with ex-trainee Kim Sujin, quoted from personal communication with Michael Fuhr. For more, see Michael Fuhr, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-pop* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 79.

[32] World Health Organization, "World Health Statistics 2017: Monitoring Health for the SDGs" (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2017), 43.

female voice sang the melody. After the video concluded, he announced that the coaches would evaluate the girls in three days, based solely on their ability to master the song and dance routine as depicted in the video.

Figure 8. Episode 2: Training video of dancers performing "Pick Me"

I want to take a moment to unpack the underlying premise of this training video and the evaluation assignment. The anonymity of the performers on stage is a crucial component of the teaching process. With performers' faces covered, the trainees watching the video could more easily envision themselves as these unidentified performers. The trainees were meant to compete for the right to become one of the performing bodies—to replace the masks with their own faces. The video already contained "the song itself"—the precise musical product that the coaches want to see and hear. Essentially, the girls' assignment was to give a rendition as close as they could to the original product, to satisfy the vision of the K-pop executives and composers who created the video version of "Pick Me."

It seems that collectivity and conformity are valued in K-pop production, even more so in a pedagogical setting with teachers guiding the process. In his work on the voice and musical

education in Korea, Nicholas Harkness discovered that students are taught to conform to the aesthetic stylistics of their vocal coaches as a display of obedience: "At school . . . singers are expected to be disciples whose vocalization should always be performed in emulation of and deference to their professors . . . . [At] school, they emulate the voices of their teachers as a kind of filial servitude."[33] Likewise, the trainees emulate the vocal performance chosen by their coaches in deference to them and to the training system that they represent. The human voice is a tool used to express one's concept of self to the world; to adapt one's voice is to adapt one's personhood. And this is precisely the learning outcome of this evaluation exercise. Using the musical evaluations, the idol survival programs tell a success story, but only for the young trainees who changed their musical identity to fit the standards of the K-pop industry. The whole practice certainly resembles the aforementioned Korean educational institutions that decide the future of their students based on a single standardized test.

Once the evaluations were completed and each trainee was assigned a letter grade between A and F, Jang Geun-Suk explained the next step of the program. The trainees were to perform "Pick Me" together for the first time on television. After this performance aired, the viewers would be allowed to cast their first round of votes for their favorite trainee. Those who did not secure enough votes would be eliminated from the competition, raising the stakes of the performance to new heights.

The creators of *Produce 101* also designed the actual stage itself to reward the trainees who had been evaluated favorably. The stage consisted of four moving triangles (figure 9), each carrying trainees of the same letter group. The letter grades determined the length and position of exposure on camera. The "Pick Me" performance began with only the "A" ranked trainees. They

[33] Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 23.

were allowed to perform at the center, and they also sang the first verse alone. Then a second triangle carrying the “B” ranked trainees shifted into view, followed later by the third and fourth triangles. The trainees who received an “F” only entered for the final dance break at the end of the song. These contestants were positioned on the floor and off of the actual stage, with no microphones to capture their voices. Wearing school uniforms, the trainees acted the part of dutiful students on television, putting on display the lessons they have learned through the idol survival program.

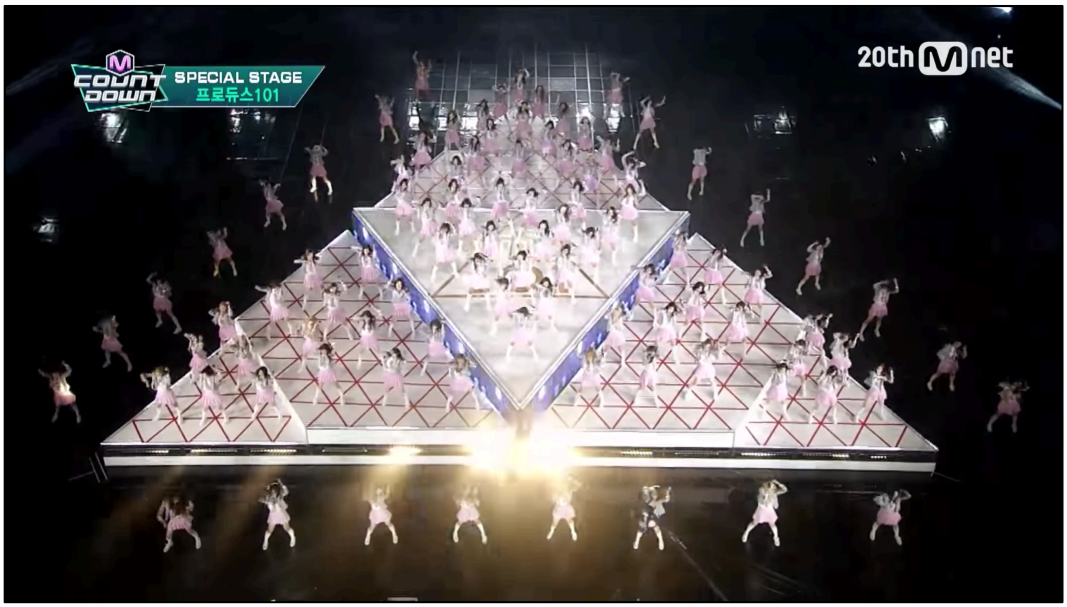

Figure 9. Episode 3: First group performance of “Pick Me”

The message is not subtle. Those who receive high grades have the most visibility, and therefore the highest chance of appealing to voters. The differently elevated triangles of the stage show the girls embodying the results of their evaluation; the grades handed down by the coaches determine the trainees’ place in the hierarchy of the stage and of the industry. Even the song structure, repetitive in true K-pop fashion, facilitates the division by grade groups. The repeated lines and sections provide each group a chance to perform the same routine for the viewers.

While the EDM (electronic dance music) genre-influenced beats blare loudly, the girls are given only one melodic line throughout the song. Consequently, the overall sound resembles that of a hundred-person sing-along. The lyrics of the chorus convey a single, pleading message:

> Pick me, pick me, pick me up
> Pick me, pick me, pick me up
> Pick me, pick me, pick me, pick me
> Pick me, pick me, pick me up
>
> Pick me, pick me, pick me up
> Pick me, pick me, pick me up
> Pick me, pick me, pick me, pick me
> I want you, pick me up

The trainees were taught not only to sing and dance in perfect unison, but also to subordinate themselves to the national viewers. And herein lies the danger of the K-pop system. The young trainees are taught to change themselves and lose the sense of individualism to create a suitable national K-pop group. But the system is harsh on those who do not fall in line. During the "Pick Me" evaluation process, three trainees voluntarily dropped out of the competition after receiving poor grades from the coaches. Enraged, the host read aloud the names of the three trainees and their respective entertainment agencies, publicly shaming them for leaving the show. "There are many who wanted to be a part of the program but did not get selected . . . If you have no willpower, we have no desire to work with you to create a national girl group. If you are not going to show us your willingness, just leave." The message was a warning to the remaining members that they are endlessly replaceable, just as the masked performers in the training video. The rewards for the survivors of the survival program are great; if the trainees can look, sound, and move the way they should, the gatekeepers of the industry will grant them celebrity status. But those who refuse the training do not deserve a spot in the national spotlight, on a stage dominated by K-pop.

The entire process of teaching, evaluating, and finally performing "Pick Me" is dedicated to bending the youth to the will of the industry and of the nation. When the viewers around the country participate with their votes, they become part of the K-pop education system. I draw attention to the idol survival programs because I perceive them as part of a larger problem. As the projects of industry and nation branding demand more from the youth, frustrations are mounting. For example, young Koreans in their twenties have started to refer to Korea as "Hell Joseon," a pejorative term that compares current Korean societal structure to the class-based Joseon dynasty of 19th century Korea.[34] It serves as a counter narrative to the tales of national prowess and global success. Hell Joseon discourse maintains that things are worse than ever for the young people of Korea despite the bright and wholesome image of the nation pushed through *hallyu*. A Korean twitter user created a map of Hell Joseon, half in jest, but the message of the map resonated with many and quickly spread online. (Figure 10) Journalist Se-Woong Koo provided an analysis of the graphic:

> According to this map, being born in South Korea is tantamount to entering hell, where one is immediately enslaved by a highly regulated system that dictates an entire course of life. Onerous education and service in the abusive military are the norm, and the only goal for the young is to become servants of the mighty corporations that rule the realm from its heart.[35]

Onerous education, servants to corporations, and a highly regulated system are all parts of the K-pop production line, as seen in the idol survival programs. The young generation uses Hell Joseon discourse in anger, to thrash against the overpowering forces that control the Korean youth. A growing group of frustrated young people is rejecting the conventional paradigm of

[34] Youngmi Kim, "*Hell Joseon*: Polarization and Social Contention in a Neo-liberal Age," in *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization: Globalization, Polarization, and Contention*, ed. Youngmi Kim (Edinburgh, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1.

[35] Se-Woong Koo, "Korea, Thy Name is Hell Joseon," *Korea Exposé*, September 22, 2015, https://www.koreaexpose.com/korea-thy-name-is-hell-joseon/.

development through nationalism and economic growth.[36] Hell Joseon discourse is an attempt to speak out against nationalistic modernization projects pushed by corporation-backed industries, and against a culture suffering from excessive educational fever. But if the narrative in the idol survival programs remains uncontested, then the new Brand Korea may silence the voices of those suffering in the rebranding project.

Figure 10. A fictional map titled "Hell Joseon: An Infernal Hellfire Peninsula"[37]

[36] Johan Cornelis Schoonhoven, "Hell Joseon: Tales from a South Korean Youth Trapped Between Past and Present" (master's thesis, Lund University, 2017), 2.

[37] This image is an adaptation of a map used in the popular online game, World of Warcraft. Original image created by Twitter user ikamusume_, Twitter post, April 6, 2015, 8:58 a.m., https://twitter.com/ikamusume__/status/585109231201755136.

CHAPTER THREE

Harnessing K-Pop's Girl Power

The success of the film series *Whispering Corridors* (*Yeogo Geodam*, 1998-2009) brought about a revival in the stagnating Korean domestic horror film industry. Set in an all-girls high school, these films explore the gruesome consequences of authoritarianism and conformity within the Korean educational system. The series antagonizes educational fever and its violent manifestation inside the classrooms, in the form of corporal punishment, suicides, and murders. Clearly, the tales of youth oppression resonate with the public, judging from the films' commercial success and positive reception. All-female institutions are naturally suited for psychological horror stories of Korean society, as Jinhee Choi explains:

> Narrative conflicts set in boys' high schools are often resolved by recourse to physical violence . . . In a girls' high school, by contrast, students may be more likely to be forced to endure or internalize conflicts with their teachers and peers, rather than confronting them or resolving them in physical terms.[38]

These situations are common since many Korean secondary schools are still segregated by gender, founded on the Confucian ideology that distinctive social and gender norms need to be taught to boys and girls.[39] Girls therefore face a specific set of expectations within school spaces. The films give a strong warning against institutional attempts to govern girlhood: any heroine's coming-of-age story can turn tragic inside the Korean classroom.

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[38] Jinhee Choi, "A Cinema of Girlhood: *Sonyeo* Sensibility and the Decorative Impulse in the Korean Horror Cinema," in *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 44.

[39] Ibid.

The warning applies to the K-pop industry, which is in the middle of rebranding itself as an educational system. In many ways, the all-girls' classrooms resemble the training spaces for female trainees and idols. The young girls who sign with entertainment agencies are almost always segregated by gender inside the facilities; furthermore, they are often contractually forbidden from public interactions with adolescents of the opposite gender unless specifically given permission. K-pop institutions seem to be operating on a similar premise that girls need to be trained in a fundamentally different way than boys. In this chapter, I zoom in on the specific strategies of training enforced on female trainees, as seen in the idol survival programs. Because K-pop is the face of *hallyu*, the industry can justify its strict control of the girls as a necessary part of national image making. I raise alarm at the relative ease with which the idol survival programs recruit their viewers in the act of policing girlhood. The nationalistic rhetoric and premise of the shows like *Produce 101* perpetuate the notion that Korean feminist struggle for freer expression is incompatible with nationalistic activities—that when it comes to the global stage, representation of girls need to be confined and controlled. And as such, the case studies presented in this chapter point out training strategies largely exclusive to female trainees.

Policing the Girl Body

Like many other music industries, K-pop maintains a set of stringent, unwritten body standards for its female stars. These gendered expectations come to the foreground, however, in the surprisingly frank episodes of idol survival programs. For instance, the fifth episode of *Produce 101* introduced a professional health trainer who was brought on to evaluate the health of the girls. The evaluation began by weighing the girls on camera despite their protestations. The girls were also taken to a clinic and immunized while being filmed, purportedly to promote a

healthy living style to the viewers. The health trainer then led a group yoga session, instructing the girls to hold a physically challenging pose while singing the logo song "Pick Me" in unison. The entire episode was a confusing mixture of musical and physical training. One thing was made clear: the overemphasis of the word "health" was meant to portray the program as a protector of these girls and of the nation's youth.

Viewers' opinions made an explicit appearance in the same episode. First, the show flashbacked to a previous group evaluation performance involving a sixteen-year-old trainee named Kang Mi-Na. As shown in figure 11, the episode then displayed online comments posted in reaction to her appearance during the group evaluation. The author of the top comment wrote, "Please, someone get rid of our Mi-Na's arm fat." This flashback was immediately followed a segment in which the health trainer lined up the girls and pinched their waists. She began pulling aside trainees that she deemed as too thick, including Mi-Na. The selected girls were then seated at a separate table away from the other trainees and given a few vegetables to eat instead of the regular lunch, a strict diet plan that was presumably enforced until the end of the program. In this brief series of scenes, the national audience seemed to be the authoritative voice guiding the training program. And from this perspective, the K-pop coaches, trainers, and showrunners appear to be guilty of nothing except carrying out the national consensus expressed online. Ultimately, Kang Mi-Na became popular enough to debut as part of I.O.I. When she found out that she won in the final episode, she began to cry and spoke about the stresses of dieting. Her greatest challenge as a trainee, she said, was the hatred she developed for her own appearance in the mirror as she practiced. But nonetheless, she thanked the viewers for choosing her and promised to work even harder. And indeed, Mi-Na continued to diet as the viewers had dictated, even after the idol survival program ended. Her quick weight loss made headlines in Korean

media outlets and was met with very positive reception; most of the articles included images like figure 10 to celebrate the effect that *Produce 101* had on the trainee's body. Many online users added comments about their own determination to follow Mi-Na's dieting strategies.[40]

Figure 11. Episode 5: Comments about Kang Mi-Na's body displayed on the screen

And thus, the narrative arc of Kang Mi-Na became an inspirational story for Korean viewers, a story in which the national audience improved upon a young girl through the mechanism of K-pop educational systems. But such attempts to portray body policing as harmless belie the dangerous reality. Female idols go to extreme lengths in order to meet the industry's body standards, often at the recommendations of "health trainers" hired by entertainment agencies. In addition to questionable weight loss practices, cosmetic surgery for women is popular both within and outside of the K-pop sphere, to the extent that Seoul has

[40] For instance, see Ji-Young Choi, "I.O.I's Kang Mi-Na Halved Arm Thickness After Rapid Dieting," *Insight*, July 30, 2017, http://www.insight.co.kr/newsRead.php?ArtNo=114584 (in Korean), and Hee-Joo Lee, "The Appearance of Gugudan's Kang Mi-Na After Her Perfect Diet Success," *JoongAng Ilbo*, February 24, 2017, http://news.joins.com/article/21308269 (in Korean).

earned the nickname "the plastic surgery capital of the world."[41] The wholesome approach to body policing on idol survival programs normalizes the practice of altering girls' appearances off the set as well. K-pop consumers become complicit participants in the body controlling practices through these shows, practices that were established by the almost exclusively male executives of the industry.

During the celebration of Kang Mi-Na's victory in the final episode, the host announced proudly that she had secured a large following from *samchon-fans*, or uncle-fans. *Samchon* is the Korean word for uncle, and *samchon-fans* refer to middle-aged men who take interest in young girl idols. Under the identity of uncle, the male adult fans liken their fan activities to that of uncles caring for their young nieces. In this way, they can avoid accusations of pedophilia; the *samchon-fan* designation "allows male adults to safely and intimately indulge in the girl bodies."[42] The all-female idol survival programs thrive on the male gaze, especially that of *samchon-fans*. While working on a second season of *Produce 101* with all-male trainees, the show's creator Han Dong-Chul reflected on his vision for the original all-girls show:

> [T]he reason why I first created the female version is because I wanted to make healthy pornography for guys. Even though the contestants just seem like a younger sister or niece, aren't they adorable? I wanted to create a type of porn that gives you that feeling . . .[43]

[41] Elise Hu, "In Seoul, A Plastic Surgery Capital, Residents Frown On Ads For Cosmetic Procedure," *NPR Morning Edition*, February 5, 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/05/581765974/in-seoul-a-plastic-surgery-capital-residents-frown-on-ads-for-cosmetic-procedure.

[42] Yeran Kim, "Idol Republic: The Global Emergence of Girl Industries and the Commercialization of Girl Bodies," *Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011): 340.

[43] Interview with Han Dong-Chul translated into English by Yckim124, "'Produce 101' PD Criticized for Saying the Show Was Intended to be Healthy Pornography," *Allkpop*, July 21, 2016, https://www.allkpop.com/article/2016/07/produce-101-pd-criticized-for-saying-the-show-was-intended-to-be-healthy-pornography.

His statement was a stark reminder that the idol survival programs are meant to please the male viewers, first and foremost. *Produce 101* creates a spectacle of girls' bodies on stage, a pornographic depiction of niece-like girls to captivate the self-proclaimed uncles. But the integration of voting and supposed nationalistic aims of the show cause the whole process to appear collaborative, between the industry and the citizens. The body of the young Kang Mi-Na was altered publicly, approved by adult male fans, and eventually envied by the general online community. Through narrative arcs such as Mi-Na's, the industry executives can claim that their training methods have national support. When girls' bodies are regulated under the protection of cultural nationalism, the consumers seem to tolerate—and even willingly participate—in their governance.

The nationwide governance of girl bodies in K-pop gives rise to what Kim Ye-Ran has termed "Lolita nationalism," a process in which girl bodies are marked as national property in celebratory tones for the conquering of the global cultural market and exhibition of national power.[44] Kim argues that managing girl idols is key to national identity formations, and her analysis is worth quoting at length:

> [G]irls are shifting in their social position from sexual objects of patriarchal desire into agents of patriotic nationalism, capable of bringing the nation a victory in the global cultural war. All of these images are intertwined in the building of, according to media and popular colloquial, the *idol republic*. Girl power is not the mere *image* reflexive of male fantasy in a patriarchal structure of representation but, more significantly, girl power is the actual *force* that has the effect of bonding various individuals and groups across different genders and generations, projecting a nation's dream of cultural pride in the construction of an imagined community known as the *idol republic*.[45]

[44] Yeran Kim, "Idol Republic: The Global Emergence of Girl Industries and the Commercialization of Girl Bodies," *Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011): 343.

[45] Ibid., 342. Emphasis in the original text.

As Kim states, Koreans who engage with female K-pop idols (and trainees) can view their participation as a national community-making process. Moreover, their participation is an act of national belonging, a way of self-identifying as a citizen in a republic of beautiful idols. As the idol girls become increasingly visible in musical, economic, and political spheres, the nation attempts to control the image of girlhood in order to control its own image presented to the global world. The shaping and cutting of girl bodies become part of a national collaborative project, coordinated by the K-pop industry.

Policing Girl Behavior

The body expectations for idols extend beyond appearance. Young idols, especially girls, must project an image of chastity and appear wholly devoted to their fans. To maintain this image, agencies forbid their idols from dating or direct public encounters with the opposite gender, barring a few exceptions. Granted, the performance of purity is practically part of the job description for K-pop girl idols, whose songs are largely about chaste, adolescent love. However, the girls are expected to continue this performance of sexual purity off the stage. And the trainees learn this expectation of body maintenance early on, through the industry-prescribed training regiment. For instance, during the eleventh episode of *Produce 101*, the popular "A"-ranked contestant Kim Se-Jeong was asked in an interview to name a male celebrity who is her ideal type. At first, she answered energetically, "I support the members of the group VIXX since they're from my agency!" But the crowd of male fans watching the interview remained quiet. The interviewer nervously remarked that the fans seem unhappy with her answer. Se-Jeong quickly caught on and changed her answer. "I love *you* all!" she said, creating a heart shape with her arms towards the crowd. And, to Se-Jeong's great relief, the male fans let out a

loud cheer. The interviewer then turned to the trainee next to Se-Jeong, a shy trainee named Kim Chung-Ha, and exclaimed, "I heard that you have been single all your life! Have you ever kissed anyone before?" Chung-Ha corrected this abrupt statement: "Once. I did have one boyfriend before." Again, the male fans did not react warmly to her answer, and the interviewer repeated her question, "But have you really had your first kiss?" Like Se-Jeong, Chung-Ha seemed to gauge the audience reaction and hesitantly shook her head no. Eagerly, the interviewer declared to the audience, "Wow, she has *no* experience in kissing!" The male fans on camera seemed thrilled with this conclusion.

Through a series of small moments like these, the trainees are taught that their every utterance and movement must appeal to the audience. In the girl idol-fueled *hallyu* wave, the girls must remain vigilant and only embody the image of girlhood deemed appropriate by their national supporters. "Visibility is a trap," as Michel Foucault famously declared, and the hyper-visible girls are trapped in the name of national advancement.[46] K-pop entertainment agencies have always monitored the trainees' bodies and behaviors, but now the idol survival programs are recruiting K-pop consumers to participate in idol surveillance.

Produce 101 in particular allotted a long segment for examining the girls' behaviors, inviting the voters to make their opinions known once again. This segment featured three "tests" in rooms with hidden cameras in order to determine which trainees are truly well behaved, even when they believe no one is watching. Older K-pop idols were brought in specially to watch the footage from a separate room, verbally reacting to the trainees' actions. The first test, titled the "Consideration Test," featured a production staff member who walked by various trainees while

[46] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200. For further comparison between idols' lifestyle and the panopticon, see Kashfia Arif, "Breaking the Fourth Wall in K-Pop: Voyeurism and Talking About Reverse Panopticons" (presentation, The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies, Kobe, Japan, June 2016).

struggling to carry two heavy water bottles. The idol-commentators roundly criticized the girls who took no notice of the staff member and praised the trainees who offered help. In the second test, the "Initiative Test," the girls were sent to practice in rooms with secret cameras. To the side of the room was a large pool of spilled Coke. Similar to the first test, the segment highlighted some trainees who took initiative to clean up the spill, and those who chose to ignore it.

The third test, labeled as the "Loyalty Test," was more elaborate and somewhat cruel. Each trainee was pulled aside in a private room to do one of the usual interviews. While a camerawoman was setting up, she knocked over an expensive looking camera, which broke upon impact. The camerawoman then begged the trainee to take the blame, pleading that otherwise she would be fired for breaking the valuable equipment. When the director of the show walked in the room and appeared angry at the situation, some trainees refused to lie about the damage while others, such as the popular contestant Kim Se-Jeong, readily covered for the panicked camerawoman. (Figure 12) Upon finding out that the situation was fabricated as a test, many trainees broke down in tears of relief. Coincidentally or not, Kim Se-Jeong rose to become the most popular contestant after this episode was aired.

Figure 12. Episode 5: Kim Se-Jeong during the "Loyalty Test"

For a reality music competition, the tests of consideration, initiative, and loyalty seem out of place. But as in the case of body policing, the scenes of behavioral tests are also mixed in with scenes of musical evaluations. The jumble creates a larger narrative that body, behavior, and musical performance are intertwined, that they are equal parts of the criteria for producing the ideal K-pop girl. For comparison, the second season of *Produce 101* with all-male trainees also included a "hidden camera" segment. But rather than a series of tests, the boys simply experienced a scare when a staff member dressed as a ghost suddenly appeared. Commentators watching the footage of the prank laughed at the boys' various reactions, and the segment ended without much fanfare. The impetus to monitor and critique behavior is strong in the case of girl idols. When it comes to the creation of girl groups, the showrunners and viewers attempt to assess the *real* character of the trainees before selecting them to debut. As an educational program, then, *Produce 101* teaches that the ideal girl to represent the nation must be able to withstand behavioral scrutiny. Those who do not meet the national standards of girl behavior are chastised on screen and eliminated from the global stage. Idol survival programs function as a

manual for national viewers, instructing them to define and regulate notions of the ideal Korean girlhood.

Policing Musical Girlhood

Korean girl idols are active only within the confines of K-pop, however defined. Female K-pop participants are subjected to special scrutiny that women performing in other genres are not. For a point of reference, I draw on an example from another domestically popular musical reality competition, *Unpretty Rapstar*. This is a rapper survival program that began in 2015, a year before the start of *Produce 101*, and it features female artists active in the Korean hip-hop scene. Its title alone indicates a countercultural impulse: by identifying as *un*-pretty in an idol republic fueled by pretty girls, the participants of this program defy traditional expectations of femininity. In a scene from the first season of *Unpretty Rapstar*, one of the contestants—a Korean-American rapper named Jessi—suddenly got up from her seat in anger, interrupting the male MCs who were leading the proceedings. She was enraged at her fellow contestants after they voted to eliminate her. Spinning around to face her competitors, she asked, "Who are you to judge me?" And Jessi quickly followed this with a freestyle diss rap:[47]

> Now in this game, I'm the motherfucking top dog.
> I'm the CEO. The rest of you kids are just folding screens.
> Little dwarf, listen up. Let me show you what a queen do.
> I keep us classy, but I'd slap a bitch if I have to.
> You with the ugly face, stop scowling.
> You think you're bad, but you ain't even seen bad yet.
> I come and go like a bad storm, take a rain check.
> I burn up the mood with the rage inside me.
> Chatty bitches in the back are just burning backlight.
> Everybody going down, mayday mayday.

[47] I have translated the Korean portion of this rap, but most of the lines were originally in English. For video of the performance, see "[Unpretty Rapstar] ep. 02: Jessi's diss rap," *Mnet K-POP* video, 4:34, February 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7kJ7pH_cds.

Bitches getting thirsty when it's pay day (ay day).
Yo listen. It's young Jessi.

Jessi spat out these words with contempt, walking around menacingly and slapping her hands to emphasize the end of verses. (Figure 13) She pronounced herself a CEO, rejecting the highest male authority figures of the music industry. Jessi directed her free-flowing emotions to attack one contestant at a time and threatened to use violence against those who judged her wrongly. Her outburst stunned those on stage with her, but the scene quickly went viral. Viewers were thrilled with Jessi's spontaneous expression, and her impromptu performance became a short but iconic moment in Korean hip-hop history. Although such a rebellious display would be unthinkable within idol survival programs, Jessi's fiery performance was enthusiastically accepted because of her self-identification as an un-pretty, un-girly hip-hop artist.

Figure 13. Jessi (center) confronts the other contestants of *Unpretty Rapstar* with a diss rap[48]

[48] Screen captured from "[Unpretty Rapstar] ep. 02: Jessi's diss rap," *Mnet K-POP* video, 4:34, February 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7kJ7pH_cds.

A year later, a friendly looking male coach identified as an "English trainer" came onto the set of *Produce 101*. He said to the trainees before him that his job is to prepare them for their activities abroad. Then, he played the clip of Jessi's infamous diss rap from *Unpretty Rapstar* and asked the trainees to perform the rap themselves. Though he called this an English speaking exercise, each trainee came up to the stage and reenacted Jessi's angry expressions and gestures as well as her words. As seen in figure 14, one trainee named Jeon So-Mi hunched over and swung her arms wildly as she recited Jessi's rap in a low-pitched voice. The text on the screen declared that her performance had a "hip-hop feel~." Another trainee sat down on the stage and jolted up angrily before rapping, recalling the way Jessi had suddenly jumped out of her seat with fury. But as each trainee performed, the girls in the audience were smiling and cheering, a stark contrast to the horrified expressions of Jessi's peers during her own rap. As soon as the imitation concluded, each trainee on stage straightened back up, giggled sheepishly, and returned to speaking in a higher pitch. The English instructor praised the girls and gave them some final advice: "You don't need to approach the English language so academically. Approach it as you do any of the other skills you master in your training. Then, you will eventually be able to increase your influence as a K-pop star."

Figure 14. Episode 8: Jeon So-Mi reenacts Jessi's diss rap

This educational exercise taught the girls to access the sounds and movements of hip-hop without internalizing the "unpretty" characteristics. The raw emotions that engendered the original diss rap were stripped away. Under the direction of the male instructor, the girls learned to *appear* expressive for the length of the performance. Jessi's defiance against the authoritarian industry was sanitized and recycled into the K-pop educational system. As a tan, English-speaking, and New York-born female rapper, Jessi represented a mix of complex foreignness inappropriate for K-pop idols—idols who were selected to represent Koreanness in their every move. *Produce 101* extracted necessary elements from *Unpretty Rapstar*, much like the way K-pop music incorporates elements of hip-hop. But at its core, K-pop girls and women are forbidden from internalizing characteristics not in line with the national notions of femininity. In their bodies, behaviors, and music, the trainees learn to wear different types of industry-sanctioned girl personalities as required by the regime of K-pop and its national supporters.

Girl Powered Idol Republic

In the idol republic of Korea, everyone is eager to harness the idol girl power. Musical institutions are attempting to achieve this by changing its image to an educational institution. They use platforms like idol survival programs to tell its supporters that they are teaching the girls to be global stars, for the benefit of the nation. And K-pop consumers feel the national imperative to support and participate in these *hallyu* endeavors. Idol girls, if trained correctly, can project an internationally appealing image of Korean culture. Korea is reorganizing its institutional and economic structures to appeal to the outside world. Just as the trainees dance and shout, "Pick me!" to appeal to the national viewers, Korean industries produce idol girls to appeal to their international viewers. Stephen Epstein notes that this is not the first time that female Koreans were sacrificed in a larger national undertaking:

> One would not go astray here in drawing intriguing parallels with the way young women were mobilised in the past via the textile industry or prostitution in camptowns near US military bases toward service for the nation: issues of personal agency clash with potential for greater and lesser exploitation by hegemonic structures.[49]

Idol survival programs operate with the explicit goal of teaching idols. But more importantly, they teach Koreans to mobilize girls once again in service for the nation.

It is striking to me that idol survival programs have become popular just as feminist movements are gaining unprecedented momentum throughout Korean society. Most notably, the #MeToo movement took root in Korea and led national conversations about outdated patriarchal norms. In public and private conversations, people are discussing the need for women empowerment in frank and serious terms. Then why is the K-pop sphere seemingly impervious? In February of 2018, at the height of the #MeToo movement in Korea, Son Na-Eun, a member of

[49] Stephen Epstein, "'Into the New World': Girls' Generation from the Local to the Global," in *K-pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, ed. JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay (New York: Routledge, 2015), 38.

the girl group Apink, faced extreme backlash for being photographed while holding a phone case that read "Girls can do anything." (Figure 15) Online commenters accused her of "promoting feminism," and her agency released an official statement that the slogan was not meant to reflect Son Na-Eun's personal beliefs. One month later, a similar scandal occurred when girl group Red Velvet's Irene mentioned in public that she had just finished a feminist novel. Her male fans became enraged and posted videos in which they burned her photos.[50] Female idols who attempt to wield girl power for themselves are met with explosive resistance.

Figure 15. Apink's Son Na-Eun holds a phone case that reads "Girls Can Do Anything"[51]

This resistance can flourish even in the midst of a feminist progressive era because girls in K-pop are governed by a special set of rules. Because female K-pop idols, unlike others in the

[50] Claire Lee, "Feminist Novel Becomes Center of Controversy in South Korea," *The Korean Herald*, March 27, 2018, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180327000799.

[51] Photo source: D. Kim, "Apink's Agency Addresses Concerns Over Son Naeun's Photo," *Soompi*, February 12, 2018, https://www.soompi.com/2018/02/12/apinks-agency-addresses-concerns-son-naeuns-photo/.

Korean girl population, are highly visible on the global stage, they must be controlled and confined for the nation. Idol survival programs encourage the national supporters of K-pop to overlook the industry's massive girl idol manipulation system. They present the industry as a successful girl education system, making a case for the necessity of girlhood policing. This perpetuates the notion that nationalist projects are fundamentally incompatible with women empowerment movements sweeping the nation. Kim Hee-Kang explained that Korean nationalism is heavily gendered now as it has been in the past:

> In spite of women's active participation in nationalist struggles, the struggles demanded that gender equality be put off until achievement of the nationalist goal. Because recently independent nations were vulnerable to many threats, mainstream society told women that the time for genuine gender equality was "not now, [but] later" . . . It turned out that the national victory was not equally open to women. Upon national independence, male nationalists forced women to choose either their nationalist aspirations or their feminist aspirations but not both, and often times the nationalist cause triumphed at the expense of feminist yearning.[52]

Patriarchal nationalist struggles demand that women sacrifice themselves for national advancement. Trainees are taught to endure the public governance of their bodies and behaviors so that *hallyu* may continue to appeal in the international domain. By claiming to educate the female trainees, the industry warns that the girls who do not bend to their educational system cannot be placed in the spotlight. Girls who "can do anything" pose the largest threat to the carefully disciplined idol republic.

[52] Hee-Kang Kim, "Should Feminism Transcend Nationalism? A Defense of Feminist Nationalism in South Korea," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (2009): 110.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

The end of an idol survival program launches a new beginning, not just for its winners but also for its viewers. Those who voted on the members of the K-pop group are meant to feel that they raised the trainees from musical infancy to maturity, that they can claim ownership and responsibility for the new group's success. Once the contestants run through the gauntlet of idol survival programs and debut as a K-pop unit, their visual, sonic, and behavioral conduct is expected to reflect the aspirations of the nation's viewers who chose them. Consequently, Koreans scrutinize and support the new group's activities, even those who did not participate in voting. This is an ongoing process of aural nationalism, a process Josh Kun describes as a careful "listening that is nationalist and tuned into the frequencies of cultural consensus and univocality."[53] They listen and watch with questions of the national self in mind. What sounds do Koreans make? How does our nationally approved music group fare on the international arena? Do the Korean ideals embodied by the group help to elevate the nation's image—and by extension, our social status and sense of self-worth? The afterlife of a K-pop idol survival program remains important to the nation, whose constituents use it to configure their own citizenship. I conclude this thesis with a look at the aftermath of *Produce 101* and its resonances at the national, international, and transnational level.

[53] Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 30.

Following the end of *Produce 101*, its eleven winners debuted together as the instantly popular girl group I.O.I. and toured various concert venues around the world. However, *Produce 101*'s hit logo song "Pick Me" circulated along its own routes, resurfacing in several contexts and versions. Most notably, it became a campaign song in the 2016 Korean general elections for the Saenuri Party, the conservative political party of which President Park Geun-Hye was the leader. The politicians filled in the role of the contestants with ease, similarly vying for votes in a race to represent the nation. To further the comparison with the trainees, the party deliberately publicized footage of the song rehearsal rather than a polished performance. (Figure 16) In the promotional video, the aged political leaders struggle to imitate the dance and the lyrics shown on the stage in front of them. The spectacle was intended to be heartwarming and a bit silly. The politicians were learning and jumping with the same youthfulness as the trainees, and the hope was that this narrative would once again move the nation's viewers.

Figure 16. Saenuri Party members rehearse "Pick Me"[54]

[54] "'DJ 와 춤을'부터 '픽미'까지…선거 로고송 변천사," *Yonhap News TV* video, 2:25, April 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPd_80WS_bY. Screen captured by author.

In these performances, only slight changes were made to the lyrical content. The main shift occurred in the pre-chorus, moving away from a vaguely romantic plea to a specific explanation of the party's platform:

Produce 101 Version	Translation
Can you feel me, 나를 느껴봐요	Can you feel me, feel me
Can you touch me, 나를 붙잡아 줘	Can you touch me, grab me
Can you hold me, 나를 꼭 안아줘	Can you hold me, hold me tight
I want you, pick me up	I want you, pick me up

Saenuri Party Version	Translation
출산휴가 이젠 걱정마요	No more worries about maternity leave
경제활력 신나는 일자리	Vital economy and exciting workplace
대한민국 행복한 나라로	Make South Korea a happy country
부탁해, 새누리!	Please, Saenuri!

The original pre-chorus narrated the girls' desires to be chosen from the first person perspective, pleading with the viewers to pick them up and hold them tight. The narration perspective in the Saenuri Party's version is less straightforward. While the party members still shouted "pick me, pick me" during the chorus, the pre-chorus appeared to be a plea *towards* the Saenuri Party, asking its members to make South Korea a "happy country." This is a small yet significant illustration of the endlessly replaceable singing subject in K-pop. The singer's identity can simultaneously be a contestant on stage speaking to the viewers and also a viewer monitoring (and voting on) the contestants on stage. The only constant is that they are all members of Korean society participating in the spirit of cultural nationalism.

When a corruption scandal involving then Korean President Park Geun-Hye resulted in the massive candlelight demonstrations a few months after the general elections, "Pick Me" was appropriated once more. More than a million protestors in the Seoul streets sang the song in

unison, replacing the line "pick me, pick me, pick me up" in the chorus with "*haya, haya, hayahae*" ("resign, resign, resign").[55] Again, the voices of the trainees and the citizens collapsed into one national plea, this time directed toward the governing body from its subjects. Each manifestation of the song furthers my claim that the products of K-pop serve to articulate and regulate the consensus of proper Korean ideologies and behaviors. The performers, producers, and consumers of an idol survival program—and in the K-pop industry writ large—build a sense of collectivity through their participation. By singing, voting, and reenacting K-pop, they create a nation, or as Benedict Anderson put it, an "imagined community."[56] And in this collective imagining, the participants can visualize themselves as modern, well-behaved members of a society—a "K-society" that is created nationally and consumed globally.

National attention and approval is the lifeblood of idol survival programs while they are on air. But to be considered a success, the shows must debut a group that attracts high international demand. After all, the rebranding of the music industry (and of the nation) is futile if no one on the outside pays attention. The groups resulting from idol survival programs so far have thrived in the international market, winning awards and selling record number of albums. Moreover, their musical activities often occur at sites of national and international consequence. For example, *Produce 101*'s group I.O.I was one of only six K-pop groups chosen to perform at the 2016 KCON in Paris, the first K-pop music festival of its size to take place in Europe. The event commemorated the 130th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Korea and France. President Park Geun-Hye was in attendance alongside many French

[55] For a video of the protest song performance, see Joseph Kim, Twitter post, December 3, 2016, 4:44 p.m., https://twitter.com/josungkim/status/805211156373569536.

[56] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

diplomats, observing the one-month old I.O.I dancing and singing in Korean. Other groups have been caught in the crosshairs of international relations as well. In Hong Kong of 2017, the boy group Wanna One—created from the second season of *Produce 101*—won the coveted "Best Male Group Award" at the Mnet Asian Music Awards (MAMA), the largest Hallyu music award show. Enraged fans of rival K-pop groups promptly swarmed and crashed South Korea's Blue House government website with petitions asking the government to weigh in on the matter. Most recently, at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, broadcasts of the opening ceremony showed national representatives from around the world marching along to "Likey," a hit song by the girl group TWICE—created from the show *SIXTEEN*. It seems the idol survival programs are fulfilling their promise to create groups successful enough to represent the nation on the global stage. These groups appear at highly visible events and display the results of careful national coaching, both musical and physical. And through their successes, the K-pop industry is fulfilling its own implicit promise to its supporters, to continue to produce worthy young cultural ambassadors to promote the brand Korea.

The shows' effective method of manufacturing K-pop artists and sounds invite comparisons to the production practices of Motown in the 1960s and 1970s. Motown's Berry Gordy Jr. mounted "invasions" into new markets—white markets—by carefully constructing his artists' image. Similarly, the heads of K-pop agencies act as impresarios and plot invasions into new markets through a meticulously controlled presentation of their artists onscreen. These market-targeting strategies are called crossover strategies because the artists and their music cross over into new territory. As Motown scholar Andrew Flory explains, "crossover, for Motown, meant not only transcending the societal and musical stylistic boundaries shaping record markets but also seeking broad, international legitimation for a body of work and a

corporate institution made by black Americans."[57] Hallyu projects similarly seek international legitimation, for a body of work and institutions made by Koreans. Crossover, for K-pop, is a strategy to expand the international fan base and legitimize Korea's position of power.

The K-pop industry strategies appear to be working quite well. On top of the international fandom for new groups like I.O.I, the idol survival programs have gained a fan base, too. When the second season of *Produce 101* (2017) introduced a stricter voter registration system that required Korean phone numbers, the excluded international fans expressed outrage. The desire to participate was so great that international viewers began tallying their own votes in separate polls. One weekly poll hosted by the fansite Soompi.com attracted 400,000 voters from 132 countries, keeping track of which contestants would have been eliminated or saved had the international fans been allowed to participate.[58] The idol survival programs continue to generate discussions about whether K-pop should remain a nationally branded genre. Certainly, the international fans are demanding to participate in the formation of K-pop artists' identities on the stage.

Beyond its international viewers, the show *Produce 101* has also attracted attention from international media distributors and content producers, especially within other East Asian pop industries. In January 2018, China's largest online video platform iQiyi launched a very similar version of the show involving young Chinese boys, titled *Idol Producer*. Its nine winners debuted as the Chinese pop group called Nine Percent. Then, the rights to a spinoff of *Produce 101* were bought by Tencent, a Chinese mega-conglomerate and the biggest investment corporation in the world. As of April 2018, young girls have been participating in the Chinese

[57] Andrew Flory, *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 13.

[58] "*Produce 101* International Prediction Polls," Soompi, 2017, https://www.soompi.com/produce-101-s2-vote/.

version of *Produce 101*, and the winners will be declared later this year. It is worth noting that one of its vocal coaches, Zhou Jieqiong, is a Chinese-born singer who won the *Produce 101* competition and became a member of I.O.I. under the Koreanized stage name Kyulkyung. She now sits with other coaches on the Chinese idol survival program, lending advice to the aspiring Chinese pop idols based on her experience in the Korean training system.

At the time of this writing, the production crew for the original *Produce 101* is filming a new season, slated to air sometime in 2018 under the title *Produce 48*. Its 96 contestants are made up of 48 young girls from Korean entertainment agencies and 48 from Japanese pop labels. The winners of *Produce 48* will debut as a Japanese-Korean pop group, but the Korea-based program, with its all-Korean cast of host and coaches, guarantees that the "multi-national" girl group will fall under the label of "K-pop." The collaboration has potential to be a milestone in the history of uneasy Japan-Korea relations. K-pop scholar John Lie argues that the brutal period of Japanese colonial rule "pulverized tradition, for better and for worse," turning the notion of Korean culture into "a proverbial floating and empty signifier."[59] Such absence of a pop cultural repository created the opportunity for a new musical genre—an ambiguous genre called K-pop—to become part of the Korean brand. From the perspective of Korean cultural nationalism, then, the arrival of Japanese idols to the K-pop industry signifies a shift in the postcolonial soft power hierarchy. Two years after the success of the original *Produce 101*, Japanese and Chinese companies are sending their young trainees to learn in the K-pop system. Their willingness to participate in idol survival programs can be interpreted as a willingness to be coached in part by Koreans, under the musical educational system marketed as a specifically Korean endeavor. The political and economical situations that gave rise to *Produce 101*'s international variants are

[59] John Lie, "What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity," *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 361-62.

likely more complex than I have presented. But the fact remains that the non-Korean industries' endorsement allows for the narrative that this is a genuine victory for Korea's global image.

The expansion of the *Idol* series from the United Kingdom to the United States has been called "an undeniably victorious British Invasion."[60] Are we then witnessing the beginning of a victorious Korean Invasion? Media coverage of K-pop groups has certainly used such rhetoric before, with headlines like "Can North Korea Handle a K-Pop Invasion?" (New York Times) and "Chicago has its own Beachhead in the K-pop Invasion" (Chicago Reader).[61] The Guardian even published an article titled, "Korea's Other Summit: K-pop Album Tops US Charts for First Time," referring to the coincidental timing of BTS topping the Billboard Chart in the same week leading up to the U.S. summit with North Korea.[62] It is evident that when K-pop bodies and sounds cross into non-Korean spaces, other nations perceive it as a penetration with major geopolitical implications for the country.

The Korean citizens find themselves in the midst of the Korean Wave, in which the small peninsular nation commands worldwide attention and soft power through its cultural exports. This has created a rise in "cosmopolitan strivings," efforts from Koreans to participate in a globalized world to elevate their social status and sense of self-worth.[63] Korean citizens,

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[60] Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 82.

[61] See Motoko Rich and Su-Hyun Lee, "Can North Korea Handle a K-Pop Invasion?" *New York Times*, March 30, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/world/asia/north-korea-k-pop-red-velvet.html, and Leor Galil, "Chicago has its own Beachhead in the K-pop Invasion," *Chicago Reader*, July, 2017, https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/k-pop-chinatown-bts-shop-korea-lovelyz-boy-band-shinee/BestOf?oid=27086972.

[62] Benjamin Haas, "Korea's Other Summit: K-pop Album Tops US Charts for First Time," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/28/bts-k-pop-album-billboard-charts-us-love-yourself-tear.

[63] Ho, "Fuel for South Korea's 'Global Dreams Factory': The Desires of Parents Whose Children Dream of Becoming K-pop Stars," *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 478.

governing bodies, media, and institutions all keep a watchful eye on the K-pop industry, with the understanding that the status of K-pop is a reflection of their own status in the world.

In the context of idol survival programs, such cosmopolitan strivings mean that the viewers use voting as a strategy to control how their nation represented on the international stage. Andrea Bohlman and Alexander Rehding identified a similar voting strategy being used in countries that participate in the Eurovision Song Contest each year, a strategy they call the "European two-step."[64] They posit that the voters from each European country elect an artist that will likely appeal to both the domestic and the wider European audiences. Viewers of *Produce 101* and other idol survival programs are participating in a *Korean* two-step, choosing participants that simultaneously embody the Korean ideals of identities and resonate with an international fandom.

Let us return to William Cheng's conclusion, that "[reality TV] shows in the United States offer an opportune lens to critique overcoming narratives drawn from the meritocratic ideals of the American Dream."[65] I have followed a similar approach throughout my thesis, examining Korean idol survival programs to critique their narratives, and by extension, the ideals of the Korean Dream from which the narratives are drawn. But the Korean Dream does not yet have a coherent brand; in fact, the need for a clear set of national ideals only arose with the recent international attention to *hallyu*. The idol survival programs, like other large-scale K-pop undertakings, are a part of the struggle to define the Korean Dream—a cohesive set of values to position the nation as a new city upon a hill.

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[64] Andrea Bohlman and Alexander Rehding, "Doing the European Two-Step," 2013: 239.

[65] William Cheng, "Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 2 (2017): 189.

Since Korean music and television dramas are the two main forces pushing *hallyu*, the creators of such cultural media products are leading the search for a national brand. In an article titled, "What is the Korean Dream?" Hong Seok-Hyun, the CEO of the JoongAng Media Network—one of South Korea's leading media groups—and a former South Korean ambassador to the United States, called on media corporations to define and embrace a specifically Korean brand:

> Korean companies have downplayed their Korean identity in the past, wishing only to appear to be global players following Western rules. The time has come, however, for Korean companies to stress their Korean cultural roots, while making that Korean culture something universal and accessible to the entire world.[66]

He concluded,

> [A]bove all the Korean dream must be about young people. . . . The process of transformation of the Korean dream, from its beginning in the Korean Wave of TV dramas and K-Pop to its ultimate manifestation as a new civilization for the world which redefines our society and our values, will be an exciting process that all young people can be the authors of.[67]

Korean society and identity will soon be redefined, says Hong, through the youth participating in K-pop and K-dramas. But his message is not for these young "authors" of the future. It is instead directed towards his colleagues, other CEOs and media moguls who are poised to control the aspiring musicians and actors—for years at a time—before they are allowed to debut on screen or stage. Essentially, his call to action is for corporations to realize the full potential of Korean youths as a national rebranding tool. The Korean Dream narrative proposed by Hong is the same narrative I have identified in the idol survival programs:

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[66] Seok-Hyun Hong, "What Is the Korean Dream?" *The Huffington Post* (blog), May 15, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/seokhyun-hong/the-korean-dream_b_7290766.html.

[67] Ibid.

> [T]he Korean dream should not be something plastic manufactured by a public relations firm. . . It must be something that Koreans, and others around the world, make together.[68]

In sum, the Korean Dream must not appear plastic or manufactured; the new Korean brand must move away from a factory-image and towards a collaborative environment primarily involving the youth—an environment I have identified as the classroom.

Produce 101 and its successors stage a narrative in which the elusive Koreanness can be defined and distinguished from the other global profiles. If U.S. reality singing competitions "unearth" the contestants' existing musical talent, the Korean idol survival programs "produce" the desired music from within the contestants. If the ideal American stands alone on stage proclaiming one's own uniqueness, the ideal Korean sits in a classroom to progress together. If the American Dream relies on a tale of individual overcoming, the Korean Dream relies on a tale of group learning.

But under the current *hallyu* promotional systems, the issues of youth oppression, especially that of young girls, remain at the core. Fortunately, the arrival of the idol republic in Korea means that issues of Korean youth pervade the national discourse. Some research has already shown that the Korean youth have a strikingly different notion of what defines a member of this changing South Korean nation.[69] I am hopeful that attention to youth-industry practices shown in idol survival programs can lead to open discussions about a youth-oriented nationalism. Furthermore, I eagerly wait for the recent feminist struggles to penetrate the K-pop industry as well, so that the girls within the system can participate differently. If done differently, the school

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Emma Campbell, "The End of Ethnic Nationalism? Changing Conceptions of National Identity and Belonging Among Young South Koreans," *Nations and Nationalism* 21, no. 3 (2015): 483.

of K-pop can teach a nation to advance the nation not at the expense of, but *for* the benefit of the young people.

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